Ricimer

(c. 418 - 19 August 472)

BRIEFING

Ricimer was a Romanized Germanic general, who ruled the remaining territory of the Western Roman Empire from 456 after defeating Avitus, until his death in 472, with a brief interlude in which he contested power with Procopius Anthemius. Deriving his power from his position as *magister militum* of the Western Empire, Ricimer exercised political control through a series of puppet emperors. Ricimer's death led to unrest across Italy and the establishment of a Germanic kingdom on the Italian Peninsula.

LINEAGE

The date of Ricimer's birth is unknown. Some scholars have dated it as late as the early 430s, which would have made him unusually young when he rose to power. A birthdate of around 418 is more likely. The names of his parents are also unknown. In his panegyric to Anthemius, given in 468, the poet Sidonius Apollinaris claimed that Ricimer was Suevic on his father's side and Visigothic on his mother's, specifying that his maternal grandfather was Wallia, King of the Visigoths, who died in 418. It has been suggested that his Suevic father may have been a son of Hermeric, the king of the Suevi around 418, or else possibly Hermegarius, a Suevic war leader who died in 429.

It has been surmised that Ricimer was the offspring of a marriage alliance between the ruling Suevic and Gothic houses and although Ricimer's father was identified as a Sueve, his identity is more frequently attested as Gothic by ancient writers. Such an alliance has been suggested as occurring in the year 431, but a more likely date is anterior to Wallia's death in 418. Wallia's Visigothic successors were not his close relatives and may have been hostile toward the family members of the former king.

As entry into the Western Empire's military was a frequent option for "losers of struggles for leadership among the barbarians", Ricimer's family may have entered the service of Rome. Historian Peter Heather suggests that the lack of stability among the Visigoths themselves may have incentivized Ricimer's pursuit of an "entirely Roman career", despite being "the grandson of the Visigothic king Wallia".

Like many Germanic figures of note, Ricimer had relational ties to other tribes, like the Burgundians. For instance, Gundobad, Ricimer's "subordinate and successor", was his nephew since his sister had married the Burgundian king Gondioc.

RISE TO POWER

According to Sidonius Apollinaris, Ricimer served under the *magister militum* Flavius Aetius alongside the *comes domesticorum* Majorian, whom he befriended. Historian Penny MacGeorge writes, "Majorian certainly, and Ricimer probably, had served under Aetius, and there may have been other elements to this connection, political, personal, and social, that would have brought them both close to the centers of political power."

Nonetheless, a power vacuum was created in the Western Empire after the events of 454 and 455, which saw the consecutive murders of Aetius and of the Western Emperor Valentinian III, who had been responsible for the *magister militum*'s assassination. After the assassinations, the Roman Senator Petronius Maximus proclaimed himself emperor. Petronius's reign lasted less than three months, as shortly before the Vandal sacking of Rome in 455, he too was murdered.

After Rome's sack, the Visigothic King Theodoric II proclaimed Avitus as Emperor, the Roman military commander in Gaul. In return for Theodoric II's support, Avitus agreed to allow the Visigoths to enter Suevi-controlled Hispania. After being proclaimed the new emperor in 456, Avitus mounted a campaign into Italy but was defeated in the Po Valley. In the interim, Avitus had named the Visigoth Remistus as *magister militum*.

Following the arrival of Avitus in Rome, Majorian gave his support, albeit reluctantly, to the new emperor. Avitus is subsequently thought to have appointed Ricimer as *comes*, a prominent military position, but this remains unclear and it is possible that Ricimer was *comes* before the elevation of Avitus. At this point, however, the Western Empire encompassed only the Italian Peninsula and portions of southern Gaul, a mere fraction of the territory held by imperial Rome in previous centuries. Ricimer, nonetheless, raised an army and navy from the Germanic mercenaries available to him and commenced campaigns directed against "barbarian" tribes in conflict with the empire. Ricimer achieved his first important victory in 456, when he defeated the Vandals in the Battle of Agrigentum and the Battle of Corsica. Although Priscus writes that Avitus had sent him to Sicily to engage the Vandals, Hydatius states Ricimer defeated the Vandals near Corsica.

Avitus' Civil War

The Roman generals Majorianus and Ricimer revolted against the Western Roman emperor Avitus who was appointed by the Visigoths after the Sack of Rome in 455. Avitus went to Gaul to gather support for his rule which he lacked from the Roman Senate and people. Avitus was defeated by the stronger rebel army at a battle in Piacenza, deposed as emperor, and died shortly thereafter in mysterious circumstances. Eastern Roman emperor Leo I appointed Majorianus and Ricimer as *magister militum* before Majorianus appointed himself Western emperor with support from the Senate and army.

Background

Since its founding in 395 AD, the Western Roman Empire was in a prolonged state of decline, and under pressure from the influx of Germanic and other non-Roman peoples known as the Migration Period. In 442, Emperor Valentinian III negotiated a peace treaty with the Vandal Kingdom of Genseric, one of the Germanic states that was encroaching on the empire. The treaty included a marriage of state between Valentinian's daughter Eudocia and Genseric's son Huneric, though Valentinian was killed in 455 before the marriage could take place. His successor Petronius Maximus, to strengthen his legitimacy as emperor, had Eudocia marry his own son Palladius instead. Genseric proclaimed that their peace treaty was null and void and used it as a *casus belli* to attack the Romans, which resulted in the Sack of Rome and the death of Maximus.

Avitus, a Gallo-Roman *magister militum*, was appointed emperor by the Visigothic king Theodoric II in the aftermath. Among historians, there is a consensus that Avitus' reign was not strongly rooted at the beginning. He was rather dependent on the support of all major players in the Western Roman Empire about that time. That support was indispensable to gain sufficient control over both the civil institutions, the Senate and the East Roman Emperor Marcian, as well as those of the army and its commanders, the generals Majorianus and Ricimer. Moreover, his relationship with the eastern part of the empire was not optimal. In contrast, his relationship with Theodoric was excellent. An explanation for Avitus' weak position might be, that he had been put forward by the Gallic senators with support of Theodoric as the successor of Maximus. In Italia, where the core of the power of the Western Empire was established, he was considered as an outsider by the Senate in Rome. According to Sidonius Apollonaris, Majorianus and Ricimer were also interested in the throne, and had already had plans in that direction after the death of Valentinian. Initially, they supported Avitus' reign, but turned against him when he got into trouble.

There were two major conflicts at the time of Avitus' reign: the Suebians in northern Hispania were on a warpath, and the Romans were at war with Geiseric since his looting of Rome. The Visigothic army, together with the Burgundy, campaigned for Avitus in Hispania to restore power there. The Roman army under Ricimer took action against the Vandals in the Mediterranean and achieved some successes, but Genseric proved difficult to beat at sea. The Vandals blocked the port of Rome, causing famine to break out in the capital which depended on grain from Africa for its food supply.

Prelude

Halfway through 456, during the food blockade, Avitus stayed in Rome where he was confronted by hungry and dissatisfied residents. The fact that he belonged to the Gallic aristocracy and had appointed several Gauls to high posts worked to his disadvantage. Some senatorial circles blamed him for the famine. In addition, he also had problems with his Roman army because he did not have enough cash to pay their wages. At this stage, Ricimer and Majorianus seriously began plans to depose Avitus. Ricimer had gained prestige after his victories and Majorian had a strong following among the troops previously loyal to Flavius Aetius. Avitus, who was never loved much by the Roman people, lost his support in the Senate in the course of 456. For Ricimer and Majorianus this was the perfect moment to draw power to them and revolted, causing the emperor to flee because a large part of the army sided against him. Avitus fled to Gaul to gather reinforcements, arriving in Arles where he scraped some troops together, but had to do it without the support of the Theodoric who was campaigning in Hispania.

Assasination of Remistus

The first action in the revolt of Ricimer and Majorian was the assassination of Avitus' *magister militum* Remistus, the commander-in-chief of the Roman army, who had been commissioned to preserve the imperial seat Ravenna for him. In September 456, Ricimer went with an army to Ravenna and surprised Remistus near the city. The sources do not clearly indicate under what circumstances the attack took place, but Remistus was killed as a result. Then, the troops of Ricimer and Majorianus moved north to intercept the reinforcements Avitus had gathered in Arles.

Battle of Piacenza

Avitus appointed a new commander-in-chief, Messianus, to succeed Remistus and prepared for the confrontation with Ricimer and Majorian. With the army he gathered in Gaul, he returned to Italia in early October. He encountered the army of Recimer and Majorian near Piacenza where there was a battle between the Roman armies. Avitus was clearly the lesser, lacking the support of the Gothic *foederati* and possibly could only have gathered part of the established Gallic army in that short time. The rebels, on the other hand, had most of the Italian *comitatenses*. On October 17 or 18, Avitus attacked the much stronger army led by Ricimer with his troops, and after a major massacre among his men including Messianus, he fled and took refuge in the city. In the immediate aftermath, Ricimer saved his life, but forced him to become Bishop of Piacenza. As for his death shortly after, the sources are vague or contradictory; it is enough to say that this was very convenient for Ricimer and Majorian.

Aftermath

After the deposition and death of Avitus, the Gallo-Roman aristocracy revolted, turning to the Burgundian and Visigothic *foederati* for support. When Theodoric and Gundioc received the message about the overthrow of Avitus and the revolt in Gaul, Theodoric left the command to his generals Suneric and Cyril and returned to Toulouse, while Gundioc with his entire army returned to the mountains of Sapaudia. Taking advantage of the confusing state, Theodoric saw opportunities to establish his own state on Roman soil. In the course of 457, he pushed the treaty with the Romans on the side with which the Gothic War began.

The recently appointed Eastern Emperor Leo I was now also emperor of the West until he had appointed a successor. Initially, Leo was not inclined to cooperate with the rebellious generals, but due the extremely unstable situation in the West he eventually accepted them. Leo appointed Ricimer as *patricius e magister militum* (commander-in-chief with the title of Patrician) and Majorian as *magister militum*, making Majorian the subordinate of Ricimer. Majorianus then forced Leo, with the support of the Senate, to appoint him as *Caesar* on 1 April 457. When Leo hesitated to acknowledge him, Majorian declared himself Emperor of the West on 28 December 457, with the support of the Senate and the army.

MAGISTER MILITUM

Julius Valerius Majorianus (457 - 461)

As *magister militum* Ricimer gained influence over the Germanic peoples occupying Gaul, Hispania, and Northern Africa, the sources suggest he and Majorian were operating in concert to seize power; the latter would become the future emperor, while Ricimer would command the military. Since Ricimer was a Germanic tribesman of Arian religious disposition, he was ineligible for the imperial throne himself. Whether or not he wished to be emperor is unknown, but in many respects, Ricimer can be viewed as an "heir of Stilicho", a barbarian general who served the Roman Empire faithfully.

With the throne of the Western Empire vacant, the Alamanni invaded Italy. They moved from Raetia and managed to reach Lake Maggiore on the south side of the Alps. Majorian led his field army north to fight the Alamanni, and defeated them. Reaching an agreement with Ricimer, Majorian was proclaimed emperor on 1 April 457. Realizing Majorian's potential as a puppet, Ricimer induced Leo to give his consent to this arrangement and on 28 December 457, Majorian's elevation to Emperor in the West was officially recognized by Constantinople.

Leo may not have actually wanted to see Majorian on the throne, but he was in "no position to object" since Majorian had a coalition that included the palatinate at Ravenna, Ricimer's Italian army, the Gallo-Roman general Aegidius, and Theodoric the Great. Leo also granted Ricimer the rank of *magister militum*.

Majorian proved to be quite a capable ruler, to such a degree that historian Michael Grant claims he was "the last competent emperor the west ever produced". The new emperor demonstrated his military skill via campaigns in Gaul and Hispania against the Vandals and the Visigoths—atop instituting diplomatic and economic reforms—which greatly increased Majorian's standing among the senate and army, prompting Sidonius to produce a panegyric. Sometime in 458, Majorian staved off an Alamanni attack on Raetia and a Vandal assault on Campania. In 460, Majorian then prepared to lead a campaign by embarking from Spain against the Vandals of King Gaiseric. However, before the invasion was launched, the bulk of Majorian's fleet was sunk in the harbor at Cartagena, resulting in a blow to Roman prestige and to Majorian's reputation, which Ricimer exploited.

During his absence, Ricimer convinced the senate to turn against the emperor, who soon disbanded his army and returned to Italy. Learning that the emperor was in Tortona, Ricimer led a detachment there and arrested him. With the Western throne vacant, the new Eastern Emperor, Leo I, appointed Ricimer to replace Majorian in his Italian command. Without a Western Emperor, Leo hoped to use Ricimer as his effective vice-regent in the West. Deposing Majorian on 3 August 461, Ricimer had the emperor tortured and finally beheaded.

Libius Severus (461 - 465)

Ricimer's murder of Majorian did not sit well with some portions of the military establishment, especially the commanding general in Gaul, Aegidius, and the commanding general in Dalmatia, Marcellinus, who ruled their respective domains independent from imperial authority. These two generals entered into open hostilities with Ricimer and refused to recognize Ricimer's position. Ricimer ruled the West without an emperor for three months. Facing pressure from the Senate and Italian aristocracy, Ricimer named the undistinguished Senator Libius Severus as Emperor on 19 November 461; Severus was recognized by the Senate in Rome, but the Eastern Emperor Leo I refused to acknowledge him as his Western counterpart.

Although he faced open military opposition from Western generals, with the docile Severus as emperor, Ricimer was master of Rome and Italy. The principal problem facing Ricimer during Severus' reign was the lengthy war against the Vandals—who controlled Corsica, Sardinia, Malta, the Balearics, and Sicily, while also making incursions into mainland Greece and Italy—and political opposition from the Eastern Empire.

In 461, Ricimer suborned the Huns under Marcellinus, who was compelled to abandon Sicily. Sometime in 463, Ricimer defeated a contingent of Visigoths at Orleans, formerly an Alan stronghold. Then in 464, Ricimer commanded an army that met an invading Alan host at the Battle of Bergamo, where he defeated the invaders and killed their king, Beorgor.

Due to diminished tax revenues and with the key armies of the West under opposition control, Ricimer needed assistance from the East to maintain order in the West. As such, Severus, despite his docile nature, represented an obstacle to Ricimer's power and a hindrance to any reconciliation efforts with Leo or Geiseric. On 14 November 465, Libius Severus died. According to Cassiodorus, he was poisoned by Ricimer, this reconstruction is doubted on the basis of Sidonius Apollinaris. Ricimer proceeded to rule the West for eighteen months without an emperor as he waited for Leo to name Severus' successor.

Procopius Anthemius (467 - 472)

For nearly two years, the throne in the West remained vacant, until 14 April 467, when Leo named the Greek aristocrat and son-in-law of Marcian, Anthemius, to the position. Leo's motivation included pressure from the Vandals, and perhaps the removal of a potential rival at Constantinople. Meanwhile, Ricimer married Anthemius's daughter Alypia, solidifying his connection to the emperor and providing the appearance of unity between the two-halves of the Empire. The marriage was an extravagant affair with much pomp and show, and the union appears to have garnered support from the Roman population. On this occasion, Sidonius composed a lengthy panegyric to Anthemius and within it praises Ricimer; he claims that a goddess representing Italy speaks to the river god of the Tiber thus:

> Furthermore, unconquerable Ricimer, to whom the destiny of the state looks anxiously, his own efforts alone hardly repulse the pirate who roves across the countryside, who avoids battle, who becomes the victor by flight. Who could endure such an enemy who refuses both peace and war? For he will never make a treaty with Ricimer. Harken to why he hates him so much. He is born of an uncertain father, while a slavewoman was certainly his mother. Now, [to show] that he is the son of a king, he proclaims his mother's adultery. Especially he envies Ricimer because two kingdoms call him to kingship; for he is Suevian through his father and Gothic through his mother. And at the same time he [Gaiseric] remembers that in the Tartesian lands [i.e. Spain] his grandfather Vallia, cast down the Vandal armies and their allies in war the Alans ... But why relate ancient flights and former defeats? He [Gaiseric] recalls his losses on the plain of Agrigentum. Ever since then he rages, because he knows that he [Ricimer] is the true grandson of the hero at whose sight the Vandals always turned in flight [Vallia]. Certainly you Marcellus were no more glorious when you returned from the lands of Sicily ... Noricum holds back the Ostrogoth because he [Ricimer] is feared; Gaul ties down the might of the Rhine because he inspires terror; because the Vandal hosts and their relatives the Alans plundered me [Italy] bare, he himself then took vengeance by his own arms. But, for all that, he is only one man; who can only accept so many risks alone.

Leo sent Anthemius to Italy with an army led by the commanding general of the Dalmatian Army, Marcellinus, a former rival of Ricimer. Ricimer must have initially viewed Anthemius' appointment as undermining his position, for unlike Libius Severus, Anthemius had a proven history of military success and had family ties to the Theodosian Dynasty.

However, needing the support of the Eastern Empire, Ricimer was forced to accept him as the price for Leo's good will and for "eastern protection against the depredations of Geiseric".

Soon after assuming the Western throne, Anthemius granted Marcellinus the rank of patrician in an effort to counterbalance the authority of Ricimer. Both Leo and Anthemius had seen the difficulty Western Emperors had in maintaining control over the Western military with the existence of a single unchallenged supreme commander.[63] Despite these potential machinations, sources such as Ennodius attest to the power and influence of Ricimer, who once wrote that Ricimer was directing governmental affairs at this time and was "second only to the Emperor Anthemius".

VANDAL WAR

Invasion of the Peloponnesus

In 467, the sea attacks by the Vandals became increasingly extensive. Geiseric's warships now also appeared off the coast of the Peloponnesus and Egypt. It was feared that there would be an attack on Alexandria, which would have consequences for the grain supply of the Eastern Roman capital. The threat explains why the Eastern Roman Emperor Leo I decided end standing by. He abandoned the diplomatic path and took steps to achieve closer cooperation with the Western Roman government in Italy.

Now that not only Italy and Sicily were threatened but also the trade of the entire Mediterranean, the forces of the East had to be united with those of Italy and Dalmatia against the African enemy. Leo agreed with Ricimer that Anthemius, general in the eastern army, would become the new emperor of the west. Ricimer's support was secured by an arrangement for him to marry Anthemius's daughter.

In the spring of 467, Anthemius, accompanied by Marcellinus, arrived with an army to Italy. After his accession to the throne on 12 April 467, a large-scale campaign against the Vandals was prepared, to be undertaken by an Eastern Roman fleet with land troops under the overall command of Emperor Leo's brother-in-law, Basiliscus. Anthemius appointed Marcellinus, also to counterbalance Ricimer, as second imperial general and commander-in-chief of the Western Roman troops involved in the campaign.

Campaign in North Africa

In 468, Leo organized a grand campaign against the Vandals in North Africa, to which the East and West would commit substantial forces. The commanding general of the Thracian army, Basiliscus, brother-in-law of Leo, assumed supreme command over the joint East-West assault, with Marcellinus commanding the Western forces. The plan called for a three-pronged attack led by Basiliscus, Marcellinus, and Heraclius of Edessa, the *comes militaris* (military count) of Egypt. Basiliscus was to land at a distance from Carthage with the main army (transported by an armada of over 1,000 ships) and then link up with Heraclius, advancing from Tripolitania. Marcellinus was to invade Africa from Sicily. Ricimer, under the overall command of Marcellinus, commanded a large portion of the Western forces in the expedition, but their fleet never sailed—due to Ricimer's veto—despite the West having agreed to contribute one-fourth of the total expedition's costs. Despite the other prongs of the attack making good progress at the onset, at least half of the joint armada was destroyed by Geiseric's fireships, causing Basilicus to abandon the attack against Carthage and withdraw back to Sicily. At this stage, Marcellinus was suddenly murdered while in Sicily, perhaps at the instigation of Ricimer.[

The Battle of Cape Bon

The **Battle of Cape Bon** was an engagement during a joint military expedition of the Western and Eastern Roman Empires led by Basiliscus against the Vandal capital of Carthage in 468. The invasion of the kingdom of the Vandals was one of the largest amphibious operations in antiquity, with 1,113 ships and over 50,000 personnel.

While attempting to land near Carthage at the Cape of Mercury (Latin: *Promontorium Mercurii*; Greek: *Ἑρμαία Ἄκρα*; now Cape Bon or, in French, *Cap Bon*), the Roman fleet was thrown into disorder by a Vandal fireship attack that took advantage of favourable wind conditions. The Vandal fleet followed up on the action and sank over 100 Roman ships. Some 10,000 Roman soldiers and sailors died in the battle. The Roman expedition was now too scattered to land its troops, leading to its complete failure.

The battle is considered to have ended the Western Roman Empire's chances of survival. Without access to the resources of the former Roman province of Africa, the west could not sustain an army powerful enough to defeat its numerous enemies.

The plan was concerted between Eastern Emperor Leo, Western Emperor Anthemius, and General Marcellinus, who enjoyed independence in Illyricum. Basiliscus was ordered to sail directly to Carthage, while Marcellinus attacked and took Sardinia, and a third army, commanded by Heraclius of Edessa, landed on the Libyan coast east of Carthage, making rapid progress. It appears that the combined forces met in Sicily, whence the three fleets moved at different periods.

Procopius records that Basiliscus, brother-in-law to Emperor Leo, had been selected as general by the emperor in hope he would balance the growing influence of the Alan *Magister militum* Aspar who sought to control Leo; however, Basiliscus sought the friendship of Aspar to further his own designs on the throne, and Aspar "repeatedly urged upon Basiliscus that he should spare the Vandals and Genseric".

Ancient and modern historians provided different estimates for the number of ships and troops commanded by Basiliscus, as well as for the expenses of the expedition, although both were enormous sums. According to the text of Priscus, 100,000 ships were assembled, although modern scholars have emended this to 1100, which is closer to Cedrenus's figure of 1,113 vessels. Peter Heather estimates a strength of 30,000 soldiers for the expedition and 50,000 total, when including sailors and the additional forces of Marcellinus and Heraclius. The figures for the money spent on this expedition ranges from the 1,300 *centaria* of gold reported by Priscus and Procopius (130,000 Roman pounds), to the 64,000 pounds of gold and 700,000 pounds of silver by John Lydus and to 65,000 of gold and 700,000 of silver by Candidus.

Sardinia and Libya were already conquered by Marcellinus and Heraclius, when Basiliscus cast anchor off Cape Bon, opposite Sicily, about forty miles from Carthage. Gaiseric asked Basiliscus to allow him five days to draw up conditions for a peace. During the negotiations, Gaiseric gathered his ships and suddenly attacked the Roman fleet. The Vandals had filled many vessels with combustible materials. During the night, these fire ships were propelled against the unguarded and unsuspecting Roman fleet. The Byzantine commanders tried to rescue some ships from destruction, but these manoeuvres were blocked by the attack of other Vandal vessels. Basiliscus fled in the heat of the battle.

One act of heroism stands forth from this naval defeat. Despite the situation, Basiliscus' lieutenant, Joannes, bravely fought the Vandal onslaught; Procopius describes him as "standing on the deck" and "turning from side to side kept killing very great numbers of the enemy". Upon seeing that his ship was about to be captured, he refused to surrender to Genso, the son of Gaiseric, instead leaped overboard in heavy armor and drowned himself. His last words were that he "would never come under the hands of dogs".

One half of the Roman fleet was burned, sunk, or captured, and the other half followed the fugitive Basiliscus. The whole expedition had failed. Heraclius effected his retreat through the desert into Tripolitania, holding the position for two years until recalled; Marcellinus retired to Sicily, where he was reached by Basiliscus; the general was, however, assassinated, perhaps at the instigation of Ricimer, by one of his own captains; and the king of the Vandals expressed his surprise and satisfaction that the Romans themselves would remove from the world his most formidable antagonists.

After returning to Constantinople, Basiliscus hid in the church of Hagia Sophia to escape the wrath of the people and the revenge of the Emperor. By the mediation of Verina, Basiliscus obtained the Imperial pardon, and was punished merely with banishment to Heraclea Sintica, in Thrace.

The treasuries of the Eastern Roman Empire were now empty. Peter Heather considers the expedition to have been the last chance to save the Western Roman Empire, which controlled only the Italian peninsula and Sicily. Without the revenue stream from the former Roman province of Africa, the west was incapable of sustaining its army.

Consequences of Failure

The failed joint expedition against the Vandals was a "shock to Roman prestige". This combined military venture—known otherwise as the Battle of Cape Bon (468)—was an unequivocal disaster that reduced Roman military might and also nearly bankrupted the Western and Eastern Empires alike, certainly dooming the Western half "to extinction" according to historian Peter Heather. Upon hearing of the disastrous defeat, the Visigoths resumed their wars of expansion against the West and the Burgundians expanded their kingdom towards Arles. With Marcellinus dead, Geiseric recommenced his attacks upon Italy in 470, which forced Ricimer—as the sole commander in the West—to assume command of Italy's defense against the Vandals. Marcellinus been Anthemius' favorite of the two generals, and his death served to widen the divide between the emperor and Ricimer. The tipping point of their relationship was the trial of Romanus, the imperial chancellor (*magister officiorum*) and supporter of Ricimer, whom Anthemius accused of treason and condemned to death in 470.

Asurvanus' Failed Usurpation

Arvandus was a Gaul who rose through the hierarchy of Imperial Roman society to twice be appointed Praetorian prefect of Gaul. His first term was successful and he himself well liked. However, in his second term he found himself widely hated, and in 468 was removed from office and brought to Rome in chains.

Here he was accused by envoys from a commission of influential Gauls of committing treason. The envoys brought with them a letter which Arvandus' secretary attested had been dictated by Arvandus. In it, Arvandus set out to dissuade Euric, king of the Visigoths, from concluding peace with the Western Roman Emperor, urging that instead, he should attack the Britons north of the Loire. The letter asserted that the Law of Nations called for a division of Gaul between the Visigoths and Burgundians.

Riothamus, King of the Britons, was allied to Roman Emperor Anthemius, so this was tantamount to declaring war on the Emperor. Arvandus was put on trial for treason. The trial should have been overseen by Sidonius, but Sidonius chose to resign his position instead, and plead for clemency on behalf of his friend. At his trial, Arvandus was found guilty and was stripped on the spot of all the privileges pertaining to his prefecture, and consigned to the common jail to await execution.

Cassiodorus asserts that Arvandus' intention was to divide the empire and seize the throne: It may be that Arvandus was hoping to obtain the throne with aid from the Gauls and the Visigoths, in the manner of the previous attempt by Avitus. If so, Arvandus was disappointed; he received no support from the Gallic aristocracy. Possibly this was a result of his undistinguished birth, but the great majority of the Gauls would have learned from Avitus' example, and realized that the day for such adventures was long past.

Cassiodorius reports that Sidonius and his friends were successful in saving Arvandus from the death penalty. "At the order of Anthemius, Arvandus, who had attempted to become emperor, was sent into exile" ("Arabundus imperium temptans iussu Anthemii exilio deportatur").

Romanus's Failed Usurpation

Romanus was a Roman Senator and a Patrician who had achieved the rank of Magister officiorum during the final decades of the Western Roman Empire. A known supporter of Ricimer, the Magister militum, this brought him into conflict with the Emperor Anthemius, who both distrusted and disliked Ricimer.

In 470, Anthemius fell seriously ill, and it was rumored that sorcery had been used to afflict the emperor. Ricimer saw an opportunity to install a new puppet emperor, and began to lay the groundwork for the accession of Romanus to the imperial throne. However, Anthemius eventually recovered, and accused a number of Ricimer's supporters of using sorcery to try to bring about his death, including Romanus, whom he also accused of seeking to usurp his throne. He had the senator beheaded in 470, an act which he hoped would secure his throne.

In fact, it did the opposite. Ricimer became furious about the death of Romanus, and was the trigger which he used to move against Anthemius, whom he deposed in 472. Following the execution of Romanus by Anthemius, Ricimer moved north to Milan with a force of six thousand soldiers. Relations between the two deteriorated to the point that Epiphanius of Pavia, bishop of Milan, was asked to negotiate peace between them.

THE CIVIL WAR

At the beginning of 472, the struggle between them renewed, and Anthemius was obliged to feign an illness and took refuge in St. Peter's Basilica. The Eastern Roman emperor, Leo, sent Olybrius to mediate between Ricimer and Anthemius but, according to John Malalas, had sent a secret letter to Anthemius, urging him to kill Olybrius. Ricimer intercepted the letter, showed it to Olybrius, and had him proclaimed emperor.

The struggle became an open war. Anthemius, with the aristocracy and the people of the city, faced the Gothic *magister militum* and the barbarian units of the army, which included Odoacer's men. Ricimer blockaded Anthemius in Rome; five months of fighting followed. Ricimer entered the city and succeeded in separating the port on the Tiber from the Palatine, starving the supporters of the emperor.

Both sides appealed to the army in Gaul, but the *Magister militum per Gallias*, the Burgundian Gundobad, supported his uncle Ricimer. Anthemius elevated Bilimer to the rank of *Rector Galliarum* and had him enter Italy with the loyal army. Bilimer arrived in Rome but died trying to prevent Ricimer entering the centre of the city from the other side of the Tiber, through the Pons Aelius in front of the Mausoleum of Hadrian.

Siege of Rome

The siege of Rome was fought between supporters of the Western Roman general Ricimer and the Western Roman emperor Anthemius. Ricimer had previously established Anthemius as emperor, but later fell out with his nominee and attacked Rome. With the help of his Burgundian allies and the Germanic warrior Odoacer, Ricimer laid siege to Rome. After a five month siege and the defeat of a relief army from Gaul commanded by Bilimer, the city fell to Ricimer.

Despite the bishop's efforts, the two were irreconcilable and began insulting one another; Anthemius called Ricimer a "skin-clad Goth", while Ricimer referred to the emperor as "an excitable Galatian". By 472, open warfare broke out between them, during which Ricimer marched on Rome itself, a siege that lasted many months. Four months into the assault on Rome, Ricimer named Olybrius (the brother-in-law of Geiseric) to the throne in a move of conciliation, since the Vandal king had been pressing for his elevation. After months of siege and suffering from starvation, Rome surrendered and Ricimer finally entered the city.

Losing any hope of external help and pressed by the scarcity of food, Anthemius tried to rally, but his men were defeated and killed in great numbers. Anthemius tried to escape by disguising himself as a beggar, but the emperor was caught attempting to flee the city at the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, where he was beheaded on 11 July 472.

DEATH AND LEGACY

Ricimer's rule lasted until his death of natural causes—apparently a hemorrhage on 19 August 472—six weeks after deposing Anthemius. His title of patrician and position as supreme commander were assumed by his nephew Gundobad. Nonetheless, Ricimer had been a figure of major significance and historians Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell put this into context with the following:

> In his seventeen-year rule of Italy Ricimer worked through four emperors—Majorian, Severus, Anthemius, and Olybrius—in almost cavalier fashion. Each was simply cast aside when they no longer served his purpose. Indeed Majorian, the last competent military emperor who took his position seriously, was deposed precisely because of this. There were three periods in which no Western emperor reigned at all. All Ricimer's public actions suggest that he found the Western emperor an irrelevant encumbrance, and he would probably have preferred to rule Italy directly in the name of the emperor at Constantinople.

Further contextualization that led to a barbarian generalissimo like Ricimer having so much influence on the Western Roman Empire is captured by historian James M. O'Flynn, who writes:

> Circumstances in the West demanded the existence of a supreme military commander who had a long record of intimate contact with barbarian troops; by the 470s, this virtually meant that he should be a barbarian. If a barbarian was unacceptable on the imperial throne (and, from the time of Constantius III, the throne was becoming less attractive to the few Romans who were eligible as generalissimos), then there had to be a generalissimo to function as a middle-man between the emperor—the impotent figurehead—and the barbarian troops, who represented real power. One is tempted, at first view, to wonder why the eastern emperors, in addition to fostering western colleagues, did not occasionally try to cultivate some well-disposed candidate for the post of generalissimo. Had Leo attempted this, perhaps the western throne might have been saved.

Without a powerful figure to guide it, the Western Roman Empire experienced an even more rapid succession of emperors, none of whom was able to effectively consolidate power. The line of Western Roman Emperors ended arguably in either 476 (with Odoacer's deposition of Romulus Augustus) or 480 (with Julius Nepos's death), concentrating the remaining imperial power in far-off Constantinople. Historian J. B. Bury claims that Odoacer was more or less a constitutional successor to Ricimer.